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International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences
ISSN(O): (2349-4085) ISSN(P): (2394-4218)
Impact Factor- 5.414, Volume 5, Issue 01, January 2018
Website- www.aarf.asia, **Email** : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

THE ROLE OF MAHATMA GANDHI IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Indian freedom struggle involves the political movements that were widely popularized against the oppressing outlook of the British dominion, both by employing non-violent and violent measures. Broadly speaking, the history of the freedom struggle can be divided into two distinctive phases, i.e., Pre-Gandhian period (1885-1919) and Post-Gandhian period (1919-1947). In the latter phase, Gandhi led millions into active politics and movement for independence mass-centric. However, he was clear that the springs of their activity did not lie with him but with themselves. He was able to grasp the basic dialectic of leader-masses relationship. Through his leadership, Indian National Congress became an effective organization for politics and mass struggle, to mobilize and unite an atomized and dispersed people, to evolve correct strategy and tactics which would correspond to the specific historical situation of exploitation and oppression.

Keywords: British Empire, Colonialism, Indian National Congress, Non-Violence, Swaraj

Political Background of India before the Arrival of Gandhi

The man who altered the nature and temperament of the national movement through a new ideology was Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi. He was one of the greatest Indians of all times and was a remarkable personality of world history. He did not merely guide a political struggle rather than he imposed upon it a unique moral code and a new technique of action

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that of non-violence. In the contemporary era of violent political movements, his struggle for freedom was purely based on the principle of non-violence. He brought idealism into the realm of practical politics and demonstrated its validity. In this approach, he spanned East and West.

The moderates controlled the first phase of twenty years of the political demonstrations of the Indian National Congress. The leaders of this period were Dadabhai Naroji, Mahadev Govinda Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, W.C. Banerjee, S.N. Banerjee, Pheroz Shah Mehta etc. All of them belonged to educated middle class and had very modest objectives. Having faith in the honesty and sincerity of the British government, they linked the progress of India with their prosperity.

They also believed that the British Government was ignorant of Indian problems and if it would come to know them, it would take measures to remove them. They tried to enlighten British public opinion and parliament concerning Indian affairs. Without having any radical ideas, moderates wanted the removal of injustice done to Indians by the British bureaucrats and demanded certain reforms in the administrative, constitutional and economic spheres.

The Congress, under the leadership of moderates asked the government to develop agricultural banks, improve police system, reduce military expenditure, provide facilities for irrigation, health and sanitation, to appoint more and more Indians in higher posts etc. They demanded better educational systems with opening up of technical and professional colleges and trial by jury. They asked for the removal of Arms Act passed during the viceroyalty of Lord Lytton.

Instead of demanding complete independence for India, the moderates only asked for larger number of elected representatives in central and provincial legislatures. They also demanded for Indian representation in the Indian Council at London and in the Executive Councils of the Centre and Provinces. With such representation, Indians would get the opportunity to be involved with the functioning of democratic government.

Of course, the single biggest achievement of this period was the understanding of the economic impact of colonialism. Dadabhai Naoroji and Justice Mahadev Ranade are the two leaders who correctly assessed the adverse impact on the Indian economy of the colonial rule. Gradually the people of India and their leaders realized the true nature of the British rule. They became convinced that the British would not grant self-government to them. M.G. Ranade's *'Essays in Indian Economics'*, Dadabhai Naroji's *'Indian Poverty and Un-British*

Rule in India', R.C. Dutta's *'Economic History of India'* proved that the prime motive of the British Government was to exploit-India economically. Dissatisfaction over the British administration was primarily responsible for the growth of militant nationalism.

There was a rise of extremism or militant nationalism within the National Congress extending from 1906 to 1919. A young group realized the futility of the ideology and techniques of the moderates. Instead of going out of the Congress, they wanted to capture it from within. Several factors contributed to the growth of extremism in the freedom struggle of India.

A considerable section of the people within the Congress was not satisfied with the policies of the Congress, which was dominated primarily by the moderates. They criticized their techniques of prayer and petition as political mendicancy. They were convinced that the moderates would realize no tangible goal. Tilak criticized the sessions of the Congress as 'the entertainments of holidays' and Lala Lajpat Rai called them the 'annual national festivals of the educated Indians.' Being dissatisfied with the moderate ideology, they preferred direct action or revolutionary methods.

Objectives of the study

The proposed study focuses on the political, economic and social situation of India since the latter half of the 19th century. This study introspects and interprets the era of mass moments led by M.K. Gandhi and narrates how the course of freedom movement was promoted and propelled by him.

Methodology

An elaborative research methodology was used to investigate, discover, describe and interpret the genesis and development of nationalism in India. The researcher has relied on both primary and secondary sources for collection of data. Primary data has been gathered from archive records; whereas secondary data is based on analysis & discussions.

The Emergence of Gandhi

Throughout his life, from his South African days onwards, Gandhi grappled with the problem of masses-leaders dialectic. The bedrock of his politics was immense faith in the capacity of the masses to fight with fearlessness, self-sacrificing spirit, courage, and moral strength. In a passage in the *Harijan* of 5 February 1939, Gandhi formulated his perception of

the political relationship between leaders, mass awakening and a mass movement. He wrote that yet the awakening of millions does take time and it cannot be manufactured by any means and method. It comes or seems to come mysteriously. National workers can merely hasten the process of anticipating the mass mind.

Mahatma Gandhi's leadership rose from grass-root level to upwards. He never imposed his leadership upon the people or their leaders. This marks the basic difference in the vision of Gandhi and the early nationalist leaders of freedom movement. Hence, he was an inheritor to the political traditions of both the moderates and the extremists. However, he attempted to give their thinking a more practical and dynamic turn. His concept of *Swaraj* was that of 'kingdom of God' or *'Ram Rajya'* that worked for the benefit of the masses.

The early nationalists underlined the poverty of the masses and colonial exploitation in India but hardly did anything for the masses of the country. On the other hand, for Gandhi political freedom was not his sole concern. He emphasized on eradication of untouchability, establishment of *Udyog Sangh*, revival of *khadi* industry, and other similar measures to improve the condition of the poor masses.

Gandhi clearly understood that leadership was essential to any mass movement. He often compared the mass movement to an army in which both generals and soldiers played an essential role. No mass movement could be waged without a strong leadership, which commanded the essential loyalty and obedience of the rank and file. On the one hand, he emphasized the role of free expression and democratic functioning within the Congress Party on the other hand, he stressed the role of discipline. A mass movement, he said, was like waging a war-a *satyagrahi* must act like a soldier of the non-violent army. Ordinary people could become a political and historical force only through discipline. The people must exercise the democratic right of choosing and changing their leaders. But they must not expect a leader to accept their uninformed dictation. A leader must lead; he must not agree to be pushed from behind by the crowd. People should expect him to sometimes take unpopular decisions.

When a large section of Congress leaders tended to get demoralized by the successful government suppression of the Civil Disobedience Movement during 1933-34, Gandhi urged them not to give way to despair by saying that, "The nation has got energy of which you have no conception but I have". At the same time he said that, 'A leadership should not "put an undue strain on the energy.' When in June 1942, the American journalist Louis Fischer asked him how he hoped to organize a movement against the mighty British Empire, Gandhi replied

that, “I will appeal to the people’s instincts. I may arouse them.” Gandhi realized that a mass movement had to be based on the active participation of the people. He said that only the highly motivated cadre of the movement could not sustain it. It was only with the might of the dumb millions that the British rulers could be challenged.

We may give one last example, that of Gandhi’s attitude towards violence in a popular movement. Of course, he remained wedded to non-violence as the basic policy of the Indian national liberation struggle. But his attitude towards stray acts of violence, especially when provoked by official violence, underwent a change. In 1922, he suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement because of the killing of police officers at *Chauri Chaura*. But in 1929 he assured Jawaharlal Nehru and others that he would not withdraw the coming struggle because of such stray acts of violence by a section of the people, so long as the mass of *satyagrahis* practised non-violence. Moreover, despite large-scale violence by the angered crowds at Sholapur and other places during 1930-1931, he did not withdraw the Civil Disobedience Movement. On the other hand, in 1942 he would not even condemn large-scale sabotage by the 1942 rebels and their virtual armed uprisings in many places. This violence, he told the Viceroy, who had presented him with the evidence of numerous acts of violence, was the result of the violence by the Government which had thus goaded the people to the point of madness.

Gandhi’s understanding of the relation between leaders and followers and spontaneity and organization can also be seen in the style and conduct of the mass movements that he organized. He carefully prepared each movement politically and ideologically. He was meticulous in gauging the extent of the people’s readiness for struggle. The tempo of the movement was developed in close correspondence with the rising tempo of the people’s feelings, and the higher-level leaders, the lower-level leaders and activists (cadre) were gradually unified into a homogenous and well-disciplined mass. Every effort was made to politically isolate the colonial rulers not only from the supporters of the. The nature of demands put forward was basically geared to the widest possible mobilization of the people.

A very important aspect of Gandhian politics was the effort to win over or neutralize sections of British society. The British people were never portrayed as the enemy. A sharp distinction was made between the colonial rulers and the British people. In this case, a disjunction was sought to be created between the British people and their political rulers who were maintaining or supporting colonialism in India.

Gandhi's conception of the relation between the leaders and the led produced two important consequences. It led to very healthy and democratic relations between the different levels of leaders themselves. These relations were not based on bureaucratic hierarchy and subordination. They were based on equality, comradeship, mutual regard, division of functions and authority, which was not hierarchical and full freedom to express differing, or opposite views. The view, put forward by some neocolonial historians that these relations were of the patron-client variety is not sustained by detailed historical research.

What is more important, the movement was able to release the initiative and innovative faculty of the lower-level activists. The higher-level leaders were usually arrested in the very beginning of a mass movement. They had prepared the people politically and ideologically and laid down the main items of the agitation in the period before the launching of the movement. However, once the movement began, there was no organization from the top. The success of the movement depended on the organizational and agitation creativity. In addition, as they would be clapped in jail, others would come forward as leaders and organizers. Thus, there was full scope for initiative, innovation and creativity at the mass level of the movement; and this ws built into the very structures of a Gandhian movement.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi was a profound political leader and thinker who constantly experimented with truth and therefore changed and developed his understanding of society and social change. Gandhi's thought and activity were in constant evolution. Gandhi was an exceptional national leader. He combined in himself the role of a socio-religious reformer and a leader of nationalist movement. He made *Satya* and *Ahimsa* as the basis of the new social order. He adopted the principles of non-violence, peacefulness, and non-cooperation to confront the British authority for the attainment of freedom. He propounded that fearlessness is the essential part of *Satyagraha*. He sought to remove all kinds of fear from the minds of the people.

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